

Inclusive Coordination: Building an Area-Based Humanitarian Coordination Model

Jeremy Konyndyk, Patrick Saez, and Rose Worden

Abstract

Coordination is essential to effective humanitarian action, yet the core humanitarian coordination and planning architecture—the cluster system—is beset by persistent weaknesses. It is dominated by large international aid organizations and is much less accessible to local frontline actors and governments. It organizes humanitarian action around major technical sectors rather than applying a holistic, people-centered approach to relief priorities. It siloes humanitarian planning and fundraising through sectoral siloes, producing fragmented funding and program implementation. It is heavily centralized, and weak at the frontlines. The net result is a coordination and planning system in which the needs and priorities of affected people are intermediated through an architecture oriented more toward the prerogatives of major aid agencies.

A reorientation is badly needed: toward a coordination and planning system that is foundationally organized around the needs of frontline aid recipients rather than the global sectors and mandates of the aid agencies that exist to serve them. A hybrid next-generation coordination and planning architecture, centered around principles borrowed from area-based programming, could retain strengths of the existing coordination architecture while addressing many of its weaknesses. Area-based approaches treat needs holistically within a defined community or geography; provide aid that is explicitly multisector and multidisciplinary; and design and implement assistance through participatory engagement with affected communities and leaders. Integrating these elements of area-based logic into the humanitarian coordination architecture would better align humanitarian action around the expressed needs and aspirations of crisis-affected people.

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Acronyms

EOC	Emergency Operation Center
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
ICCG	Inter-cluster coordination group
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NNGO	National nongovernmental organization
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
WASH	Water, sanitation, and hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Introduction

Since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, humanitarian leaders have committed to make humanitarian action “as local as possible and only as international as necessary.”¹

Coordination is essential to effective humanitarian action, yet the core humanitarian coordination and planning architecture is strikingly at odds with that vision.

Humanitarian coordination remains dominated by large international aid organizations, and is much less accessible to local frontline actors and governments.

It organizes humanitarian action around major technical sectors and the large agencies that lead them, rather than applying a holistic, people-centered approach to relief priorities. It siloes humanitarian planning and fundraising through individual cluster processes, producing fragmented funding and program implementation. The top-heavy, centralized nature of the clusters leaves frontline coordination anemic. The net result is a coordination and planning system in which the needs and priorities of affected people are intermediated through an architecture built more around the needs and priorities of major aid agencies.

A reorientation is badly needed: toward a coordination and planning system that is foundationally organized around the needs of frontline aid recipients rather than the global sectors and mandates of the aid agencies that exist to serve them.

This paper proposes a new way forward. A hybrid next-generation coordination and planning architecture, centered around principles borrowed from area-based programming, could retain well-performing elements of the existing coordination architecture while addressing many of its weaknesses. Area-based approaches address needs holistically within a **defined community or geography**; provide aid that is explicitly **multisector and multidisciplinary**; and design and implement assistance through **participatory engagement** with affected communities and leaders. Applying these elements of area-based logic to the humanitarian coordination architecture would better align and integrate humanitarian action around the expressed needs and aspirations of crisis-affected people.

This approach would not do away with the clusters but would roll back the expansive growth of their roles and refocus them on their comparative advantages: providing technical advice and quality assurance; maintaining global best practices and standards; and addressing duplication and gaps within designated technical areas. Meanwhile core operational and humanitarian program cycle functions—needs assessment, response planning, appeal construction, and frontline delivery coordination—would shift from the top-down, sectoral logic of the clusters to a bottom-up, area-based logic.

¹ This phrase has been widely used across the humanitarian system since 2016 and featured prominently in the UN Secretary-General’s report to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.

[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Secretary-General's%20Report%20for%20WHS%202016%20\(Avance%20Unedited%20Draft\).pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Secretary-General's%20Report%20for%20WHS%202016%20(Avance%20Unedited%20Draft).pdf)

This paper will review existing deficiencies in humanitarian coordination, explore lessons from area-based approaches to humanitarian action, and outline how the logic of area-based approaches could be applied to the wider coordination architecture. It is informed by a review of existing literature on humanitarian coordination and area-based programming; a thematic workshop hosted at CGD in May 2019; a series of 12 in-depth interviews with senior practitioners from the United Nations (UN) and nongovernmental organization (NGO) communities; and several high-level roundtable consultations with aid leaders. Collectively these consultations and interviews involved more than 50 humanitarian experts. While their inputs were extremely helpful in refining the paper’s analysis and recommendations, the end product is not a consensus document and the authors take sole responsibility for its content.

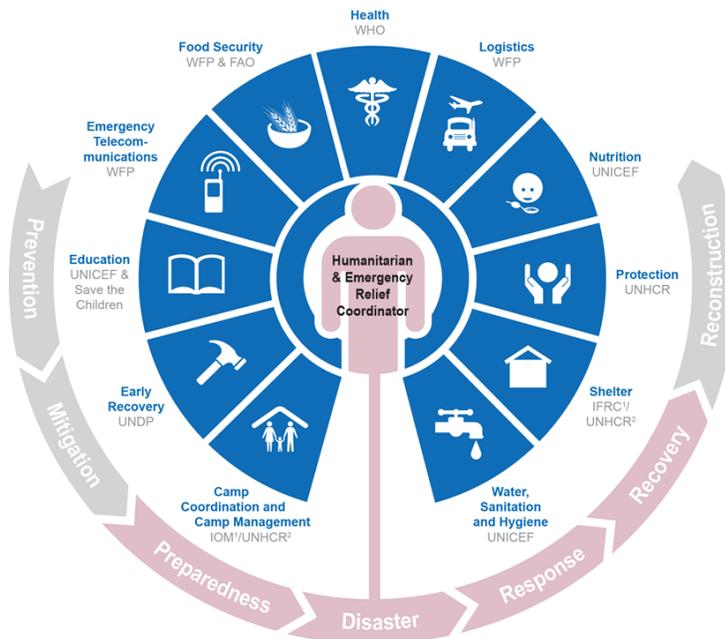
We researched and wrote most of this paper prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, so the main text does not explicitly discuss the challenges that crisis poses for the humanitarian sector. However, the principles of area-based coordination apply well to this kind of complex outbreak response and hold potential to play an important role in the fight against COVID-19. We discuss this further in Appendix 1.

The Clusters Made Real Progress...

The existing coordination architecture is often siloed, parochial, and exclusive. But it remains a significant improvement over what preceded it. The reforms initiated by Jan Egeland—then the UN’s chief humanitarian official—to create the cluster approach in 2005 brought enhanced structure and accountability to a previously chaotic coordination landscape. In the pre-cluster days, technical sectors had no clear arbiter for quality standards and best practices, and no designated accountability for last-resort programming. It was not unusual for multiple UN agencies to have roles in a given technical area, and for each to maintain their own conflicting program standards and coordination mechanisms. A high-level policymaker observed in one of our consultations that the nature of problem facing the system at that time was quite fundamental. Humanitarian coverage in major crises was often haphazard and unaccountable—such as, for example, no organization being clearly on the hook to ensure coverage of lifesaving water and sanitation needs in a high-profile crisis like Darfur. Gaps were common, as was the inverse problem: inefficient duplication of effort.

The creation of the cluster approach addressed this by establishing a new humanitarian coordination architecture centered around major technical program sectors (figure 1). Each cluster was headed by a “cluster lead” agency, tasked with convening the cluster, facilitating cluster coordination and planning, serving as a global arbiter of related technical standards, managing information on cluster-related field operations, and acting as a “provider of last resort” for ensuring essential program delivery functions in challenging contexts.

Figure 1. Cluster approach to humanitarian coordination



Source: OCHA, What Is the Cluster Approach? www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/about-clusters/what-is-the-cluster-approach

The advent of the cluster system made significant headway in addressing the “Wild West” coordination scene that it replaced. A 2010 evaluation of the cluster approach by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) and Groupe URD—five years into the cluster reform process—found that the clusters had yielded a range of improvements. The evaluation cited reductions in duplication and gaps, improved learning on technical and normative matters, more predictable coordination leadership, and improvement in the quality of humanitarian appeals. The establishment of the clusters and designation of cluster lead agencies created a set of agreed focal points for last-resort accountability around the primary humanitarian technical sectors. The cluster lead agencies also improved humanitarian learning, using the convening power of the clusters to advance development of best practices and innovations. In the research consultations for this paper, senior practitioners and executives universally saw these dimensions of the clusters as highly valuable.²

...With Persistent Operational Shortcomings...

However, as the cluster approach evolved and grew, shortcomings emerged. The consultations for this paper, and review of literature on humanitarian coordination, identified a consistent set of operational problems that the clusters have proved unable to overcome.

² Steets et al., *Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Report*, 2010.

The existing coordination system **marginalizes the influence of local actors**. The centralization of most cluster activity at the capital level puts their decision-making processes out of reach for many local-level government and civil society leaders. Their complex structures and processes are unfamiliar to those outside professional humanitarian circles, and align poorly with how affected people define their own needs and priorities. Local organizations have long complained that cluster meetings predominantly operate in languages preferred by international agencies, although there is some evidence this may be improving.³ Meanwhile participation at a decision-making level remains negligible, with national NGOs (NNGOs) constituting only 7 percent of Humanitarian Country Team members globally according to 2016 and 2020 data.⁴ The picture is only slightly better at the level of individual clusters, with local leaders (government and NNGOs) accounting for 18 percent of country cluster co-leads and 22 percent of subnational cluster co-leads. Cluster participation overall is comprised of 43 percent NNGOs and 4 percent host government representatives, but this may be more indicative of cluster attendance than actual influence over cluster decision making (a concern reinforced by the disparity between this statistic and the allocation of cluster financing priorities, discussed later in the paper).

An important driver of this marginalization of local actors is the fact that clusters have proved **strongest at the central level and weaker at the field level** where the most humanitarian operations are occurring. A 2018 paper by ALNAP⁵ cites numerous studies of cluster coordination, consistently finding that subnational coordination is a weak spot. The paper concludes that the sector-centric, one-size-fits-all coordination model enshrined in the cluster approach is an inherently poor fit for the diverse and holistic requirements of subnational coordination. Cluster lead agencies can more easily cover a single cluster coordinator function at the capital level than supply field-level coordination support across multiple different field sites in a large crisis context. 2020 data compiled by OCHA notes that while 59 percent of country-level clusters have a dedicated cluster coordinator and 34 percent have a dedicated information officer, almost none have these positions covered in subnational cluster structures and instead have to double-hat other cluster lead agency staff.⁶

Another crucial weakness is that the cluster system has largely **failed to provide effective coordination between different technical sectors**, even as it has made progress on coordination within individual sectors. This is no longer tenable in a world where humanitarian programs must transcend sector boundaries. While humanitarian country teams routinely establish inter-cluster coordination groups (ICCGs), these are frequently

³ The 2020 “Note on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level” document, provided to us by OCHA, indicates that “55% and 79% of clusters/sectors at the national and subnational levels (if present), respectively, reported using an official or local language of the country of operation. More than one third of cluster/sectors that did not use official or local languages in meetings reported providing translation capacity at least half the time. Rarely is the translation capacity official.” It should be noted the “official” languages of a country often include the preferred humanitarian operating languages of English and French, so this statistic may overstate the degree to which these meetings are actively seeking to accommodate local accessibility.

⁴ OCHA, Global Overview of Coordination Arrangements in 2016, 2016.

⁵ Leah Campbell, “How Can We Improve Humanitarian Coordination Across a Response?” 2018

⁶ OCHA, Note on IASC Coordination Structures at Country Level, 2020

seen as weak and ineffective. The individual clusters' influence is backed by the ownership of their respective lead agencies while the ICCGs are underpowered and institutionally orphaned. The structure of the clusters orients cluster personnel to focus primarily within their own technical specialties, not between them. And ICCGs operate primarily at the national level, while the need for inter-sector coordination is often most acute at subnational level. Practitioners in our workshop also observed that parochialism and turf disputes between the clusters further impede cross-sector alignment.

A further complication has been the **uneven level of commitment by cluster lead agencies** across clusters and countries. The health cluster was for years one of the weakest, because WHO had not prioritized staffing or supporting it (this has, commendably, improved following WHO's post-Ebola emergency reforms). The protection cluster, led by UNHCR, has long been an uneven performer as well,⁷ with some UNHCR country offices prioritizing their focus toward refugee programs rather than non-refugee protection priorities. Because clusters tend to be relatively centralized, weak leadership by a cluster lead can bottleneck sectoral performance across an entire response. There is little formal accountability or consequence for weak cluster leadership; it is essentially unheard of for an agency to lose its lead role over poor performance. And donors have viewed and funded agencies' cluster responsibilities as a peripheral subset of the agencies' larger mandated roles, meaning that poor cluster performance does not meaningfully jeopardize fundraising prospects.

...And a Skewed Business Model

A final, and critically important, shortcoming of the clusters has been the way their fundraising function has skewed the humanitarian program cycle. The 2010 GPPi/URD evaluation⁸—while confirming real progress under the cluster reforms—noted the potential for conflicts of interest if the cluster lead agencies' financing, coordination, and program delivery responsibilities became conflated. A failure to establish “[c]lear distinctions between the coordination and financial management functions of the cluster lead organizations” would spur conflicts of interest and make NGOs overly dependent on UN agencies for funding. It further warned that tying the clusters too closely to fundraising processes could “distract attention away from other, more direct and operational common activities” and “favor large international organizations over smaller and more local ones.” This proved prescient, as the clusters evolved well beyond technical quality assurance and operational alignment roles to exert expansive influence over appeal planning and financing. The central role the clusters have come to play in the humanitarian program cycle and in humanitarian

⁷ A comprehensive 2016 evaluation of UNHCR's protection cluster leadership found that the agency's cluster performance was “mixed,” with particularly uneven performance on priority-setting, work planning, and accountability to affected people. <https://www.unhcr.org/5a5dcd2f7.pdf>

⁸ Steets et al., *Cluster Approach Evaluation 2 Report*, 2010.

funding dynamics runs contrary to the humanitarian community's trajectory toward more cohesive and demand-driven response efforts.

This alignment of financing with technical and coordination leadership means that most response plans and appeals are built, from the ground up, within the sectoral logic of the individual clusters. The clusters' individual planning processes have come to form the building blocks of the Humanitarian Program Cycle. A cluster will coordinate needs assessments within its remit, feed these into its sectoral planning process, identify and validate the projects and funding priorities that are included in the funding appeal, and monitor implementation and impact of those projects. These elements are preemptively siloed by technical sectors, with implications for the entirety of a humanitarian operation. Needs that straddle multiple clusters, or fall outside of existing cluster parameters, end up either orphaned or artificially subdivided to suit the logic of each cluster.

Integrating fundraising, coordination, and technical leadership in the clusters has entrenched power and resources around the cluster lead agencies at the expense of wider operational coherence.

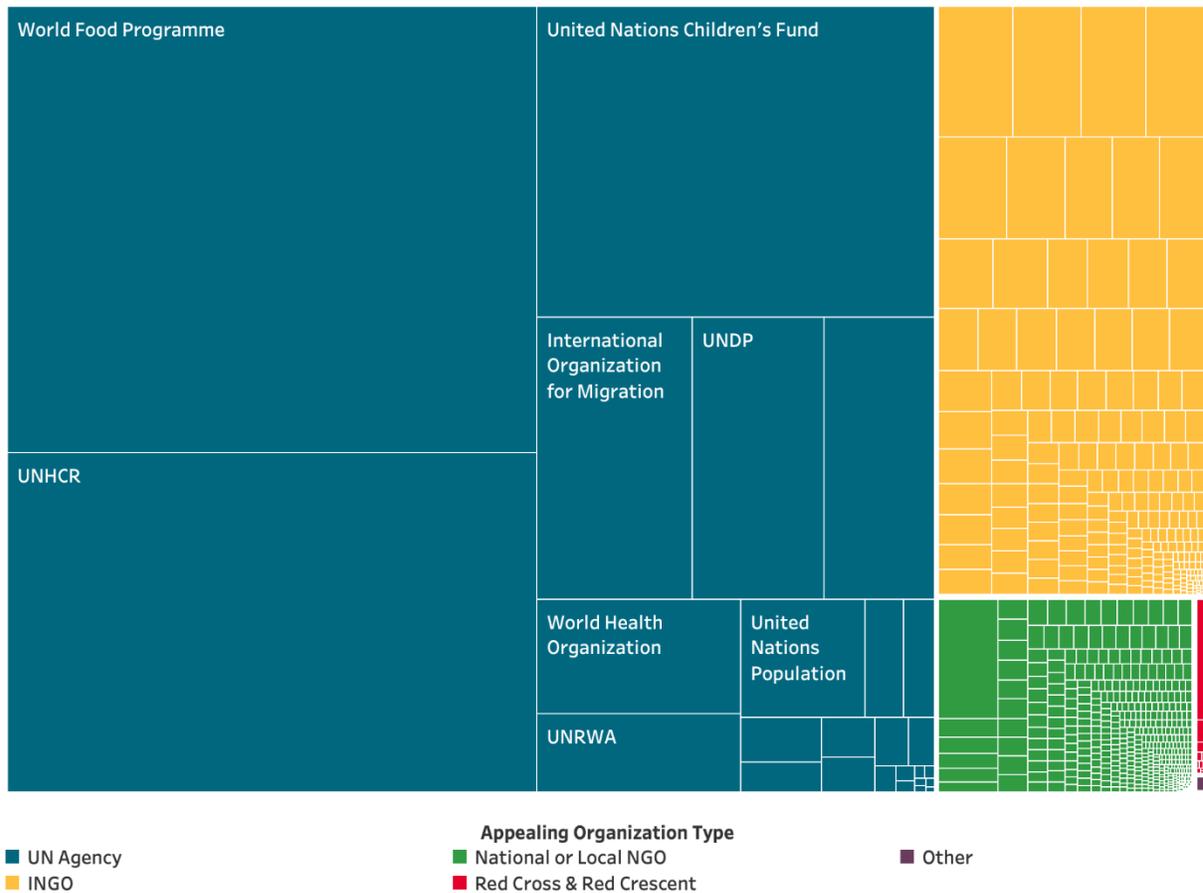
In practice this has entrenched power and resources around the cluster lead agencies, at the expense of wider operational coherence—much as GPPi and URD warned in 2010. The cluster lead agencies' own mandates and program areas dovetail with the parameters of the clusters they lead—which is sensible in terms of technical leadership but creates concerning incentives in terms of program delivery and financing. Cluster leads are expected to objectively facilitate, within their sectors, the identification and validation of various agencies' projects for inclusion in the consolidated funding appeal. But they do this as *beneficiaries of those same appeals*, competing for the same pool of resources, and in a position of influence over which projects are presented and prioritized.

This link between cluster leadership and agency fundraising creates, at a minimum, the risk of a conflict of interest that undercuts the objectivity of cluster-driven appeals. The data on appeal construction and funding reinforce these concerns. Almost invariably the cluster leads turn out to be the dominant proposed recipients of the project funding requested in the appeal—typically by a large margin. We reviewed the 10 largest consolidated humanitarian appeals for 2019 to assess the link between cluster funding priorities and cluster lead agencies' own programs; eight of these provided proposed project-level cluster allocation data.⁹ This analysis found that the amounts requested for a cluster lead agency are typically orders of magnitude larger than the amounts requested for other members of the clusters. Figure 2 shows a consolidated global picture of the proposed recipients of all requested funding across the selected appeals. The UN agencies that serve as cluster leads are far and

⁹ We reviewed the 10 largest 2019 HRP for which funding requirements are listed at the project level in the FTS database: Bangladesh (JRP), Iraq, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria (HRP), Syria and Venezuela (RRPs). Syria and Venezuela RRP were excluded from analysis of due to the lack of relevant data (Venezuela) or lack of disaggregated data (Syria) on the health, food security, nutrition, and shelter clusters.

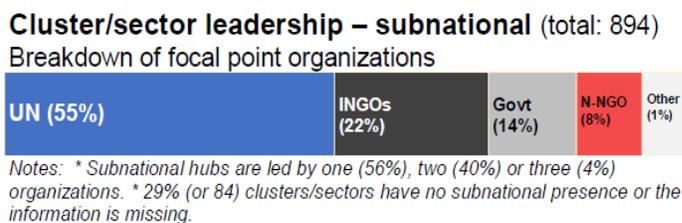
away the largest proposed funding recipients, at 77.4 percent, followed by international NGOs (INGOs) at 15.2 percent, with local or national actors a distant third with only 7.3 percent.

Figure 2. Top 10 funding requests by appealing organization, 2019



This stands in stark contrast to cluster participation data (figure 3), in which UN agencies are 9 percent of participants while NNGO and INGOs are 43 percent and 32 percent, respectively. The funding requests align more closely, however, with cluster leadership designations, in which the UN holds 75 percent of the cluster lead agency roles.

Figure 3. OCHA data on cluster lead agency and cluster composition



Zooming in on the level of individual clusters, table 1 shows funding requests for food security, health, nutrition, and shelter programming across the largest 2019 humanitarian appeals.¹⁰ The dominant position of the cluster leads comes through clearly in the proposed financing of cluster interventions. In every appeal, a cluster lead agency’s coordination responsibilities also place them at the top of the queue for potential funding (sometimes in conjunction with a fellow UN agency with which it shares the sectoral mandate—WFP and UNICEF on nutrition, WFP and FAO on food security, and UNHCR and IOM on shelter). In most sectors the cluster lead(s) are proposed to receive a sizable majority of overall sectoral funding; often orders of magnitude greater than the next largest partners, as shown in the table below. The accompanying charts in figure 4 represent this data graphically, consolidating the data across these appeals by cluster to represent the amounts these appeals collectively request for the cluster leads and cluster members. We explain our methodology for compiling and analyzing the data shown here in appendix 2 to this paper.

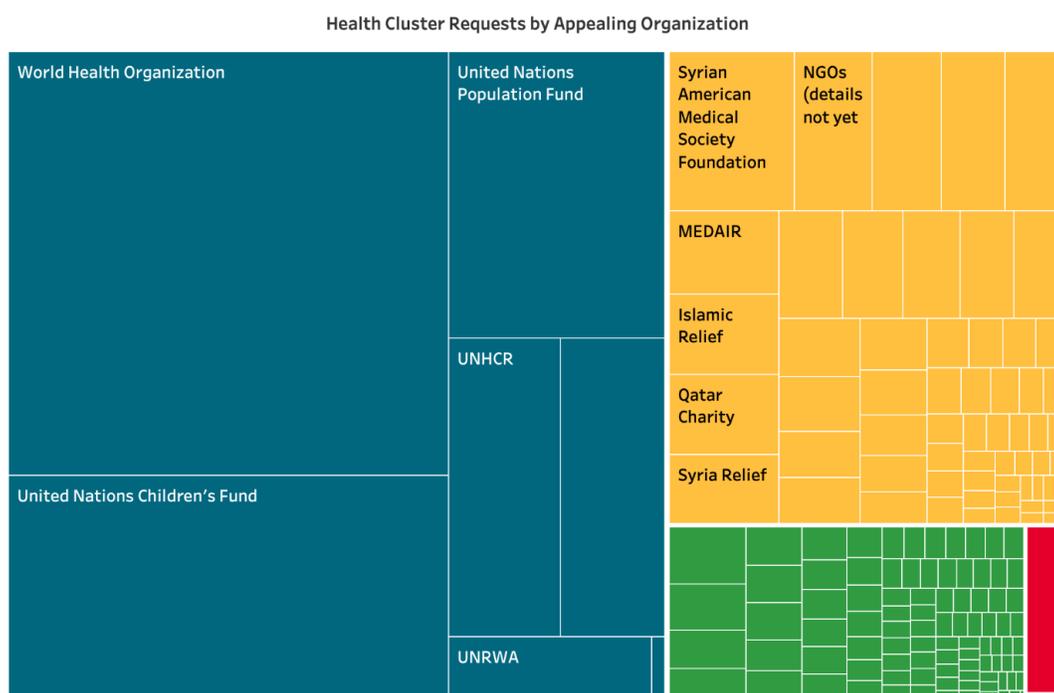
¹⁰ This data is drawn from the eight appeals, among the top-10 largest, for which cluster-disaggregated funding request data was available.

Table 1. Percent difference between the largest request for a national or local organization and the amount requested for cluster lead agency

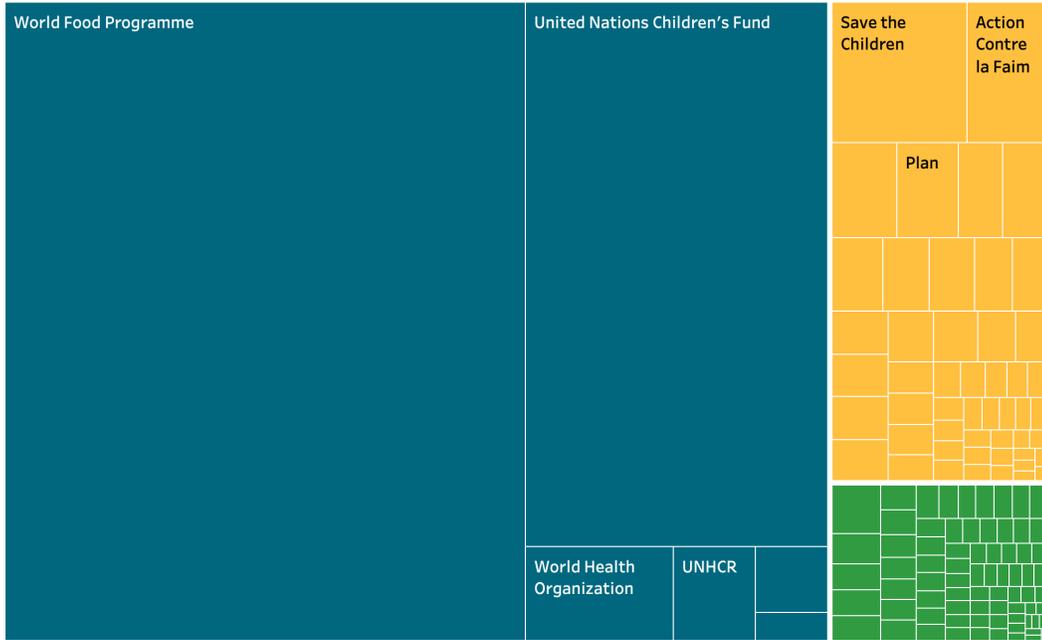
	Food security	Health	Nutrition	Shelter
Bangladesh JRP (Rohingya)	10,670	527	No national or local	3,364
Iraq HRP	13,781	1,390	No nutrition appeal	5,124
Mozambique HRP	No food sec appeal	No national or local	No national or local	No national or local
Nigeria HRP	13,568	No national or local	19,059	1,586
Somalia HRP	9,386	192	4,592	1,912
South Sudan HRP	18,733	439	10,627	2,641
Sudan HRP	20,747	3,713	15,496	7,391
Syria HRP	9,623	2,103	12,034	6,466

Note: JRP=Joint Response Plan; HRP=Humanitarian Response Plan

Figure 4. Collective amounts requested, by cluster, for cluster lead agencies and cluster members/partners in the largest humanitarian appeals



Nutrition Cluster Requests by Appealing Organization



Food Security Cluster Requests by Appealing Organization



Shelter Cluster Requests by Appealing Organization



This conflation of technical leadership and fundraising influence produces outsized funding to cluster leads, much smaller amounts of direct resourcing to INGOs, and negligible amounts for NNGOs (health is the major exception, because WHO has not traditionally sought to act as a funding intermediary for health sector projects). In the original vision for the cluster approach, the cluster lead role came with a responsibility to serve as “providers of last resort” in instances where key gaps were not being covered by other cluster partners. However humanitarian appeals now almost universally present cluster leads as providers of *first resort*, and donor practices follow suit.

This has served to establish the cluster lead agencies as de facto pooled funds for their clusters: like a pooled fund, they accept and consolidate donor contributions and allocate a portion of those funds onward to other partners. But the cluster lead agencies play this pooled-fund manager role without any of the transparency on transaction costs, project selection, and outgoing fund allocations that would accompany a normal pooled fund. Instead they are able to act as both manager and recipient of those funds, with sole discretion to determine which funds will go to their own projects and which will be sub-granted to partners.

The lead-agency-as-sector-pooled-fund model has significant influence on donor behavior: a CGD 2018 paper, “Rethinking the Humanitarian Business Model,” found that large UN agencies dominate fundraising in their technical sectors, with UNICEF receiving nearly as much WASH funding as the entirety of the NGO community, and WFP consistently securing more than three-quarters of global food security funding. There are some functions for which funding should reasonably follow cluster lead status—such as maintaining a baseline last-resort operational capacity, and running common procurement pipelines—but

this is a far cry from serving as a first-resort pooled fund for the majority of sectoral program funding.

Area-Based Approaches in Practice

The cluster approach has yielded imperfect progress: it has brought greater order and professionalism to the work of mainstream international aid groups, but also in practice placed those groups and their institutional interests as the central focus of humanitarian coordination. The enduring shortcomings of the cluster system, and the counterproductive incentives and power dynamics that it reinforces, reflect a coordination and planning system that was built more around the perspectives of international aid agencies than those of crisis-affected people.

A next-generation humanitarian coordination model must rebalance and reorient coordination—to retain the improvements the clusters have achieved while re-centering coordination closer to the people in need rather than the people serving them. It must engage much more inclusively with national leaders, civil society, and affected people, and better tailor coordination to diverse local contexts and capacities. It must also improve cohesion—integrating planning and programming around approaches that transcend individual sectors (such as cash).

The growing practice of “area-based” program approaches in humanitarian action provides a compelling framework for modernizing the humanitarian coordination model. Area-based approaches have proved useful in making humanitarian program delivery more explicitly people-centered and comprehensive, most prominently in urban settings. While area-based approaches take different forms in different contexts, a 2015 working paper by Parker and Maynard¹¹ identifies three defining principles:

- The programs are **organized and targeted geographically**. They recognize differentiation of contexts even within individual crises, and thus start by identifying defined geographic units as the foundation of a relief operation.
- They are explicitly **multisectoral and multidisciplinary**. Given that different sectoral needs do not exist in isolation from each other,¹² area-based approaches address the ways in which diverse needs interact to shape acute vulnerability among crisis-affected populations, and area-based approaches align program delivery priorities and competencies accordingly.
- Area-based programs engage the affected population through **participatory design**. Relative to traditional sector-oriented programs, area-based programs tend

¹¹ Elizabeth Parker et al, *Humanitarian Response to Urban Crises; a Review of Area-Based Approaches*, 2015.

¹² Sanderson and Sitko noted in 2015 that “A population’s needs for shelter, WASH, health, food security, and livelihoods do not exist in isolation from one another. Rather, needs interact to shape vulnerability, and must thus be met with a multi-sectoral approach to guide targeting.”

<https://odihpn.org/magazine/ten-principles-area-based-approaches-urban-post-disaster-recovery/>

to be more accessible to local actors (both recipients and local responders) and center more explicitly on how affected people define their own priorities.

By better aligning how diverse interventions interact within a defined context, and by deepening the involvement of the affected population, area-based approaches enable a more demand-driven program logic than the supply-driven logic enshrined in the cluster approach. While area-based approaches have most frequently been utilized by aid agencies as a programming model, there have been instances where area-based interventions have verged into a larger quasi-coordination role—albeit often on an ad hoc basis. The results¹³ suggest the potential for a wider application of area-based logic in humanitarian coordination:

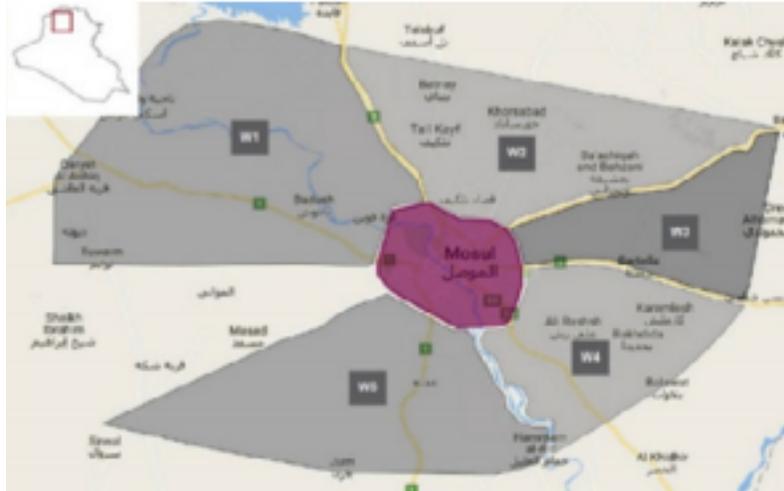
Iraq

In Iraq, an area-based approach was used to organize response to acute needs around Mosul in 2016-17. The city has historically hosted a religiously and ethnically diverse population, and the 2003 Iraq War initiated a prolonged period of long-term displacement, and heightened tensions among different groups.¹⁴ As the prolonged battle to retake the city from ISIS progressed, internally displaced persons (IDPs) began returning or relocating from camps to the urban and peri-urban areas of east Mosul at a high rate. The shelter cluster was designated to provide first-line assistance in areas newly retaken from ISIL, and needed a way to provide timely assistance that would be well tailored to the particular needs of different ethnic communities, varying levels of humanitarian access, different displacement dynamics in different areas in and around Mosul. The cluster and its partners applied an area-based coordination model, outlining five peri-urban wedges based on the town's river and major roadways, which provided natural demarcation points (figure 5). Service delivery was then organized multi-sectorally within each wedge, with focal point organizations assigned to each wedge to coordinate operations, communications structures, and information- and assessment-sharing (figure 6). This approach to multisector delivery within a geographically devolved coordination model enabled better adaptation to local conflict dynamics and access opportunities as the frontlines moved inward during the city's liberation.

¹³ These case examples draw on a compendium of area-based interventions compiled by InterAction and the Global Shelter Cluster, complemented by a literature review and interviews. The full compendium is available here: <https://www.sheltercluster.org/settlements-approaches-urban-areas-working-group/documents/full-case-study-compendium-area-based>

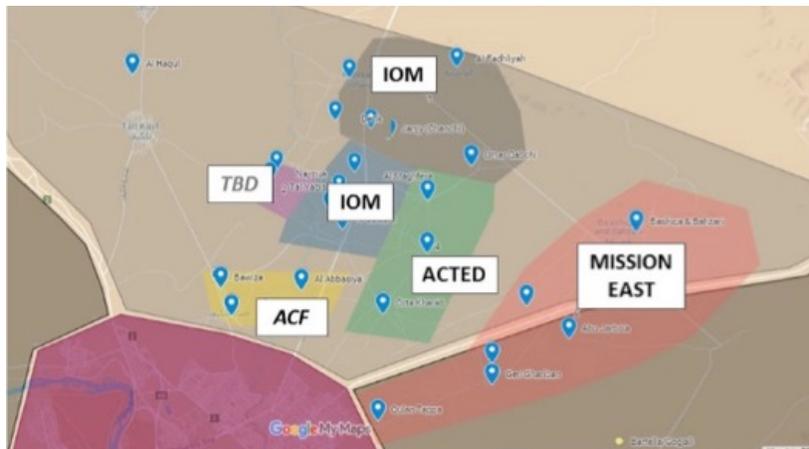
¹⁴ UN Habitat. *City Profile of Mosul, Iraq: Multi-sector assessment of a city under siege*. 2016, 21.

Figure 5. Mosul response operational "wedges"



Source: USWG Compendium 2019

Figure 6. Multi-partner operations within one wedge



Source: USWG Compendium 2019

Organizing the response operation geographically and multi-sectorally allowed the lead focal points to coordinate more comprehensively with the full range of relevant partners than would normally be possible on a cluster-by-cluster basis. This produced a more integrated coordination of service provision than is possible through a traditional sector-oriented model, cutting across cluster siloes and reducing coverage duplication and gaps.¹⁵ It also enabled more comprehensive engagement of cross-cutting issues like humanitarian access, or sharing of best practices for aid distribution, than would be possible between individual technical cluster meetings. There were drawbacks as well, however. The ad hoc nature of the arrangement led to challenges as some partners had difficulty reconciling their pre-existing

¹⁵ Global Shelter Cluster. *Area-based Approaches*. 2019, 22

projects to the new coordination model, and some were reluctant to take on new coordination roles because they lacked the internal resources or expertise to do so.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the history of recurrent conflict, displacement, and return has produced many communities where returned refugees, returned IDPs, and highly vulnerable host community members live side by side. Interventions centered on only one category of vulnerability, or one particular technical sector, are common. But the disparate levels of support those projects provide to different categories of households contribute to intra-community tensions and are a poor means of addressing the interrelated needs that these commingled populations jointly face. To better address this, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) launched an initiative that engaged with these issues at a community level—recognizing that displacement dynamics affect communities writ large, not only the displaced or returned individuals within them.

NRC’s “Urban Displacement Out of Camps” approach in Afghanistan used an area-based engagement model to promote more consistent access to humanitarian services across different sectors and population categories (inverting the more traditional tendency to establish sector or population status/category as the operational entry point). It targeted eight districts in Afghanistan, based on high degrees of community-level displacement impact. It then facilitated a community-based assessment and mapping exercise that enabled community members to determine key information needs, opportunities for engagement, and assess what community services and capacities were already in place. To address gaps in coordination and improve the population’s access to information on support services, the project established community centers in each of the target districts. These centers served as entry points for amplifying community input, and as bases for mobile outreach teams that could engage down to the neighborhood level to provide information and consult on needs comprehensively across returnees, IDPs, and host populations.

This approach enabled a more holistic and population-driven intervention than is possible through traditional cluster-centered approaches. By applying an area-centered logic, the initiative was able to simultaneously engage with displaced people and the wider host community and orient services to their collective needs across multiple technical sectors. The explicit inclusion of the affected populations in needs mapping, frontline coordination, and needs assessment elevated the voice of local civil society in humanitarian efforts. Moreover, by looking at displacement in the context of wider community vulnerabilities and capacities—rather than through narrow sectoral or displacement-status lenses—the initiative fostered better linkages between acute relief needs, development, and durable solutions.

However, the project also experienced challenges: it served a quasi-coordination role but lacked a formal coordination mandate, so other humanitarian service providers did not always engage responsively. Addressing humanitarian service gaps between sectors or population categories proved difficult at times, because it went against the grain of normal

humanitarian response design. Because the standard humanitarian approach was at cross-purposes with a holistic, context-centered approach, NRC’s ability to promote access to services often depended more on ground-level personal relationships than formal coordination structures.

Somalia

In Somalia, worsening displacement into Mogadishu around the time of the 2011 famine produced a large informal settlement—Zona K—with weak service provision and little effective coordination. To address glaring deficiencies in protection and basic services, a tri-cluster strategy (Shelter, WASH, and Health) was developed under UNHCR and UN Habitat, coordinated by a dedicated tri-cluster coordinator and supported with funding from the Common Humanitarian Fund. The initiative sought to align interventions across multiple sectors to improve living conditions, respond to needs of the newly displaced, and maintain and encourage the integration of protection in programming—recognizing that none of these priorities were attainable within the parameters of individual cluster activity.¹⁶ The strategy included a total of 16 projects across 14 distinct partners in support of multisector shelter, non-food items (NFI), and WASH emergency response, implemented through a variety of partnerships and modalities, including local private sector companies and established humanitarian partners.¹⁷

Zona K partners, including local organizations, large NGOs, UNHCR, OCHA, and the designated tri-cluster coordinator, convened to summarize activities throughout Zona K and develop the tri-cluster strategy.¹⁸ The approach started with mapping and site planning, followed by the creation of access roads and storm drainage, and consultations to help protect residents from eviction.¹⁹ Beginning the project across three sectors facilitated a “culture of coordination” in the project, and it expanded in 2013 to include projects specifically focused on education and protection.²⁰

The initiative proved effective in developing a cross-sectoral common understanding of needs in Zona K, and the integration of services across cluster and partners improved efficiency. Including displaced people in development of context-specific planning standards reportedly helped to overcome “weak community structures” to enhance community involvement and help manage expectations.²¹ There were challenges as well, however. The quality of coordination reportedly declined after the dedicated tri-cluster coordinator departed and the initiative reverted to periodic high-level coordination meetings chaired by

¹⁶ In February 2012, the Core Humanitarian Fund allocated \$10.75 million to the tri-cluster to address IDPs; Core Humanitarian Fund. CHF First Allocation, Tri-Cluster Strategy-IDP Settlement Response, Mogadishu, 2012, 1.

¹⁷ Somali Shelter-NFI Cluster joint report, 2015, 23.

¹⁸ UNOCHA. Zona K Group Meeting, Saturday, 7th July 2012, Mogadishu- summary of discussions, 2012

¹⁹ USWG Compendium 2019, 40.

²⁰ USWG Compendium 2019, 40.

²¹ USWG Compendium 2019, 40.

OCHA.²² Funding dynamics also proved important, as partners reportedly reverted to implementation “tunnel vision” once their own project funding was secured; and projects funded through sources outside the tri-cluster partner agencies impacted planning but did not always coordinate with the tri-cluster setup.²³

Democratic Republic of Congo

In DR Congo, the large size of the country and the existence of multiple discrete internal crises led the Humanitarian Country Team to devolve coordination and planning responsibilities to four subnational hubs (regional-level bodies called CRIOS) that report up to the DRC Humanitarian Country Team. These regional coordination hubs in turn developed area-based, sectorally integrated operational plans in their areas of responsibility, working through smaller geographic zones at the local level (CLIOs). This structure feeds integrated regional and subregional planning and data into annual appeal updates and generates quarterly updates to operational priorities.

Underpinning this hub-based planning is a robust collection of multisectoral needs data, which enables prioritization of geographically specific needs down to a health-zone level. Financing behavior has helped to reinforce the hub-centered approach, as several major donors have given implementing partners the flexibility to shift geographic priorities as conditions evolve. The DRC humanitarian pooled fund has also reinforced the approach, providing flexible block-grant allocations to each hub and allowing the CRIOS to determine how best to allocate across priority needs.

Importantly, this approach has coincided with a significantly increased proportion of pooled fund resources going to local organizations, whose easier access to the CRIO structures has enabled them to advocate for funding in a way that would have been impossible with a Kinshasa-centered allocation process. The proportion of pooled funding to local groups jumped from an average of 19 percent in the five years prior to establishing the CRIOS to 38 percent for 2017-18, the first two years of the CRIO-driven multiyear response plan.²⁴ The CRIO/CLIO coordination model has also streamlined staffing requirements, as instead of extending and replicating each cluster coordination process across multiple field sites, aid groups can focus on building single integrated platforms in each hub location.

Outlining a Hybrid Coordination Architecture

The next generation of humanitarian coordination must be more holistic, more inclusive, and more oriented towards the voices of the people it serves. A hybrid coordination architecture centered around area-based principles could address longstanding deficiencies in the cluster-based coordination model. This would build upon the experience like the cases

²² Somalia Tri-Cluster. *Mission Report – Shelter Cluster Coordinator, Summaries and Main Conclusions*, November, 2012.

²³ Somali Shelter/NFI Cluster, *Reviews of Coordination and Response, Combined Report*, 2015, 50.

²⁴ UNOCHA. *Country-based Pooled Funds - Business Intelligence*. 2020. <https://pfb.unocha.org/#anchor-2> (accessed June 22, 2020)

discussed above, as well as the occasional practice of establishing distinct subnational coordination structures—such as the Gaziantep-based hub for North Syria coordination, or Darfur coordination within Sudan. But it would go considerably further than previous experiments with distinct subnational coordination arrangements, which have often mirrored the standard Humanitarian Country Team and cluster practices (along with their inherent shortcomings) at a subnational level. Centering a new coordination approach that is intentionally grounded in area-based principles would enshrine local context rather than sector as the essential organizing principle for coordination and planning; reorient the humanitarian program cycle around explicitly multisectoral interventions rather than boundaries of the individual clusters; delink cluster leadership from funding influence; and open coordination and planning systems to much greater participation and leadership by local actors and aid recipients.

This would not mean the end of the clusters, but would represent a significant scale-back of the cluster “system.” The clusters would—indeed must—continue to play the roles that have demonstrated the most value: providing technical guidance and quality assurance; maintaining a level of baseline “last resort” implementation capacity within each cluster lead; supporting sector-wide common services (including the essential operational work done by the logistics and emergency telecom clusters); and eliminating duplicative technical coordination between agencies with overlapping mandates.

But the clusters would no longer serve as the driving force behind the humanitarian program and funding cycle. Instead, program cycle functions like needs assessment, program design and planning, project validation and appeal development, operational coordination, and impact evaluation would shift out of the clusters and be decentralized to subnational coordination hubs and localized operational zones. The clusters would revert to a role analogous to the technical support division of an aid agency—as centers of technical excellence and operational quality assurance, but not platforms for operational planning and execution. This would have implications for the funding model as well: clusters would no longer play the lead role in identifying and validating needs and funding priorities for humanitarian appeals—this function would shift to subnational hubs. The clusters would still have robust technical input to the process, and could review and challenge field-based priorities where justified, but they would not lead it.

The clusters would revert to a role analogous to the technical support division of an aid agency—as centers of technical excellence and operational quality assurance, but not platforms for operational planning and execution.

Applying such a logic to the coordination architecture would alter the coordination process and the humanitarian program cycle in important ways:

1. Deepened local engagement: Devolving planning and coordination to integrated subnational hubs would enable better engagement of local leaders and affected populations in the coordination and planning process. And participants in our

workshop noted that area-based approaches can provide an easier interface with municipal authorities: the programs’ proximity to local authorities enables easier interaction, the geographic focus often aligns with the authorities’ own scopes of responsibility, and the multisectoral nature of the program better coincides with the intersection of challenges that face local actors. Reorienting the coordination and planning architecture along these lines would go partway toward facilitating better integration of local voices. But additional measures would be needed, including investment in language and translation services to enable local groups to meaningfully participate in humanitarian coordination (or better yet, to allow international actors to keep pace with coordination meeting held in local languages). Explicit channels and relationships would need to be developed to ensure that local stakeholders could meaningfully participate (a dynamic addressed in more depth in CGD’s recent paper on People Driven Response).²⁵

2. Stronger and more integrated subnational coordination: A hybrid coordination approach would shift principal responsibility for assessment, planning, and operational coordination from the clusters to consolidated subnational and local hubs. Subnational information management and coordination functions that currently (and somewhat duplicatively) operate at a cluster-by-cluster level would instead be devolved to these field hubs. The hubs could take on the lead role in compiling data for Humanitarian Needs Overviews and developing interventions for the Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs). The clusters would continue to provide technical input and oversight to this process, but would no longer constitute the underlying framework around which planning is organized. This would devolve more coordination support capacity closer to field implementation level, and allocate it in a more rationalized and efficient way. Each principal field location would have one integrated coordination and planning process rather than multiple cluster lead agencies struggling to staff and manage parallel cluster processes across all field locations.

Where feasible, subnational coordination structures should build an interface with—and actively support—existing locally led representation and coordination systems.
3. Context-centered needs analysis: Shifting the focus of operational coordination from sector to geography would re-center needs analysis away from sectoral siloes. Where traditional “assessments” tend to focus on gaps within individual sectors, area-based assessments holistically assess both gaps *and existing capacities* in a discrete context—producing analysis that reflects existing local service provision, activities of local stakeholders, shelter and settlement dynamics, needs and gaps, and the relationships between levels of government. Instead of multiple sector- or project-oriented needs assessments overlapping across crisis-affected populations, an area-based coordination approach would organize needs analysis around the subnational

²⁵ Jeremy Konyndyk and Rose Worden. *People-Driven Response*, 2019.

hubs, with multiple aid organizations working in a geographic unit conducting joint multisector context analysis, in close alignment with local communities and authorities. It would usually involve, as a starting point, a joint mapping exercise in which local leaders articulate geographic units and identify needs and capacities amongst affected populations.

4. Demand-driven rather than supply-driven planning: The traditional coordination model sees needs in terms of what it is built to supply: interventions that fall within its predetermined sectors. By making humanitarian planning and coordination more accessible to local actors and more attuned to local contexts and capacities, and freeing it from existing sectoral siloes, area-based planning could open opportunities for a more demand-driven form humanitarian relief, more responsive to local perspectives. The devolution of core planning processes and priority-setting closer to affected people and their leaders will enable their demand signal to come through more explicitly. A shift from sector-oriented needs assessment toward comprehensive context mapping would enable relief planning that better accounts for ground-level realities and integrates the coping and delivery capacities that exist in local communities. And it would also better reflect priorities that fall across, or outside of, the traditional humanitarian sectors.
5. Enhancing alignment across sectors: Relief aid is most effective, and most dignified, when it engages affected people's needs holistically. Cash programming has shown the power of relief aid that is able to transcend individual agencies or technical sectors. But cash programming is not the only type of aid that is most effective when it transcends sectoral limitations. Indeed, many if not most forms of aid are inherently multisectoral (food aid, for example, must align with nutrition, WASH, health, livelihoods, and often protection support in order meaningfully address food insecurity). The cluster system, locked in its inherently sectoral design, has proven intractably weak on this. Area-based programming models, in contrast, have proven to be a productive mechanism for aligning relief interventions across and between sectors, and for addressing population priorities that fall beyond traditional sector definitions. By establishing geography rather than sector as the fundamental organizing principle of aid planning, an area-based coordination approach would facilitate the delivery of more coherent aid interventions across sectors.

Cash programming is not the only type of aid that is most effective when it transcends sectoral limitations—most forms of aid are inherently multi-sectoral.
6. Delinking cluster leadership from financing incentives: Under the current humanitarian business model, overall response planning originates within the sectoral clusters. Cluster plans are facilitated and vetted by lead agencies whose own programs align with those sectors, and cluster leads' programs become the dominant cluster budgetary priorities. This rewards a supply-driven approach to aid, in which agencies with mandates for particular kinds of programs or populations raise funds by seeking out needs that match their predetermined mandates. Re-centering program cycle planning around a geographic logic with an explicitly multisector

orientation would begin to shift this incentive structure. Leadership of a technical cluster would no longer confer dominant influence over collective resource priorities; those priorities would instead be established at a subnational level, distinct from the technical clusters.

7. Improve coordination with development, peacebuilding, and refugee programs: An area-based coordination model could provide a better platform for “triple nexus” planning (interventions that cut across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors), and for aligning mainstream humanitarian operations with UNHCR-coordinated refugee programs.

Leadership of a technical cluster would no longer confer dominant influence over resource priorities.

On the triple nexus front, the structure of traditional cluster coordination aligns poorly with development and peacebuilding interventions, as it is focused primarily within the technical parameters of the individual clusters and struggles with dimensions that fall between or across them—as both development and peacebuilding do. An area-based coordination approach that is grounded in the local context could more holistically incorporate the particular development and peace dimensions of that context. This would also better align with the perspectives of affected people, who do not organically categorize their needs as “humanitarian” or “development”—and can be frustrated at mediating their own needs through those categories.

On the refugee front, area-based coordination could provide a platform for aligning across refugee and non-refugee needs in areas with mixed populations. This has long been a point of contention in the humanitarian sector, and is currently governed by a brief OCHA-UNHCR “Joint Note” issued in 2014. The Joint Note has somewhat reduced friction between refugee and non-refugee interventions but struggled to truly harmonize them—and indeed, the Note itself does not identify consistency or equity in addressing needs as an objective. As a result, the distinct systems for addressing refugee and non-refugee needs rarely reconcile the relative coverage of the respective groups’ needs. This disconnect can produce wild disparities in the levels and types of support sought and provided for refugees, their host populations, and adjacent IDP populations. The 2020 appeal cycle, for example, seeks nearly four times as much funding per capita for refugees as it does for non-refugees, despite often similar levels of need.²⁶ An area-based coordination and planning model, by holistically reflecting the relative needs of all populations within a given geography, could provide a basis for better harmonizing and reconciling coverage of needs in mixed contexts.

²⁶ The 2020 Humanitarian Response Plans, which predominantly target non-refugees, seek \$19.6 billion to serve 97.2 million vulnerable people, an average per capita cost of \$201. The 2020 Regional Refugee Plans seek \$9.2 billion to serve 11.6 million refugees, an average per capita cost of \$798. <https://www.hpc.tools/>

Getting from Here to There

Overhauling the coordination architecture would not be an abrupt or hasty process. Over the last 15 years, the clusters have become deeply enmeshed within humanitarian practice, and a transition to something new must proceed judiciously. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee and donor leaders should kick off a review process aimed at field-testing area-based coordination models in a set of pilot countries. This review could begin in late 2020, to coincide with the 2021 round of humanitarian response plans. The experiences in the pilot countries could then inform a wider redesign of the coordination and planning architecture.

The hubs should be intentionally designed to increase the access and ownership of local stakeholders.

Three to five initial pilot countries should be identified, reflecting a diverse set of crisis types, operational contexts, and needs profiles. Ideally the pilot responses would include at least one setting prone to recurrent fast-onset natural disasters, one setting prone to chronic slow-onset food insecurity events, and one setting experiencing a complex conflict crisis and forced displacement. A mixed refugee and non-refugee crisis setting would also be helpful, and could explore how area-based approaches might facilitate better harmonization between UNHCR's refugee-specific coordination system and the wider non-refugee coordination system managed by OCHA.

In these pilot countries, Humanitarian Country Teams, national relief leaders, and major donors would need to collaborate around a number of steps to establish the new pilot coordination and planning structures:

Establish and Empower the Hubs

Under an area-based coordination model, subnational coordination hubs would take on the primary coordination and planning role currently held by the clusters. The hubs would convene all operationally relevant humanitarian players active within the hub's area of responsibility, whether local, INGO, or multilateral; where feasible they would also include or interface with government service providers. The hubs would be charged with managing Humanitarian Program Cycle functions within their areas of responsibility: coordinating joint needs assessment and analysis, establishing a locally tailored response strategy and corresponding resource priorities, coordinating frontline operations, and tracking implementation of the response strategy. The technical clusters would retain important roles in this process, advising on program technical design, monitoring program quality, and assessing impact within their sectoral lanes.

The scope and number of hubs would vary depending on nature of the crisis and the socio-political landscape of the country. The hubs would in turn determine the composition of local-level area-based geographic zones within their areas of responsibility (or in a more compact crisis, the hubs and the zones might be the same). Whenever possible, the process

of defining the area-based programming zones should be co-led by representatives of the affected population. In most existing area-based programs, this is achieved by a community-led mapping exercise, which defines locally appropriate geographic zones and also reflects the local capacities and actors present in each area.

Finally, the hubs would need to be intentionally designed to increase the access and ownership of local stakeholders. Devolving coordination and planning out to a subnational level helps in achieving this but is not sufficient. Factors such as the working language of the meetings would also need to be addressed to ensure that local relief leaders could meaningfully take part and contribute. Where locally established leadership structures already exist, humanitarian coordination hubs should engage and align with them, rather than supplant them. Where such structures do not exist, establishing an advisory council of leaders from among affected populations—as proposed in a recent CGD paper²⁷—could also help to reinforce hub-level local engagement.

Context-Centered Needs Assessment and Planning

Devolving principal responsibility for planning to the hubs, rather than the clusters, would enable a more integrated and context-specific approach to needs analysis and response planning. The members of the hubs would be charged with organizing multisector needs assessment (in collaboration with local authorities, where feasible), building on the community-led mapping exercises that establish the area-based coordination zones. The outcomes of these processes would be consolidated at a national level to inform the national humanitarian needs overview, enable comparison and prioritization of needs, and inform overall response priorities.

Consistency and comparability of data would be a vital part of effective area-based coordination. Under the cluster system, the varying data systems across clusters and agencies have posed serious obstacles to integrated needs analysis and effective information management. Our surveys of donors have identified this as a particular concern, noting that comparability of needs data within and between crises makes it difficult for them to reliably allocate funding based on severity of need.²⁸ A set of common data standards would be needed to ensure a degree of consistency and comparability across communities and subnational hubs, and between different crisis response plans. The REACH Initiative’s effort to establish a common “multisector needs index” illustrates how this might be achieved. Drawing on multisector needs data, it ranks overall need across several tiers of severity and estimates the number of people in each tier.²⁹ This echoes the approach of the Integrated Phase Classification scales used for ranking food insecurity, and provides a far more textured view of the scale and depth of need than is conveyed by tradition sector-centered needs estimates.

²⁷ Jeremy Konyndyk and Rose Worden. *People-Driven Response*, 2019.

²⁸ Authors’ consultations and surveys of donors conducted January – March 2020; publication forthcoming.

²⁹ Examples of these reports can be found at <https://www.reach-initiative.org/>

The area-based needs analyses would in turn inform the hub-level planning and prioritization of response activities. While the clusters would provide input and technical quality assurance within this process, the overall approach would not be organized on a sectoral basis. Instead, zone-level needs would be evaluated holistically, assessed against localized capacities and coping strategies, and used to identify and prioritize the greatest needs regardless of sector. This geographically oriented process would then form the foundation of the country's Humanitarian Response Plan, which would in turn compile and prioritize needs from across the country's hubs.

Finance by Geography Rather than Sector

Empowering the geographic hubs rather than the sectoral clusters as the building blocks of the humanitarian program cycle would shift the implicit incentives within the standard Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) approach. Current financing practices de-prioritize inter-sector coordination, encourage supply-driven sector programming, and reward global technical mandate over ground-level presence and delivery capacity. Realigning funding instead around an area-based logic would better facilitate cross-sector cohesion and demand-driven programming. We will outline a fuller set of proposed reforms to financing practices in a forthcoming paper, but for the purpose of this document, several shifts should be highlighted.

An area-based HRP model would open up a different approach to humanitarian financing, which at present organizes funding flows predominantly around sectors, and tracks contributions to most appeals on the basis of a narrow set of cluster-approved projects. Area-based HRPs could reorient funding flows toward prioritized, multisector activities organized at hub and zone level rather than individual agency/sectoral projects. The HRPs would use activity-based rather than project-based costing, meaning that funding could flow to any competent actor positioned to address the priorities in the appeal, instead of only to specified agencies' projects (activity-based costing remains rare in humanitarian appeals, but is being done in some settings, notably the Democratic Republic of Congo).

Moving away from enumerated projects and cluster-based planning would also delink the normative and technical roles of cluster lead agencies from those agencies' own program fundraising. In doing so it would reduce the incentives (and ability) for cluster lead agencies to steer funding toward their own programs. This is not to say that they would no longer play a substantial implementation role; rather that their ability to attract program funding would be more explicitly tied to their localized delivery capacity in each regional and local hub, rather than their cluster position or global mandate.

This approach would enable a more accurate reflection of actual needs and coverage. Activity-based costing would facilitate more candid prioritization of needs by delinking cluster priorities from any individual agency's projects. And it would enable all funding aligned with the HRP priorities to be captured in determining appeal-coverage levels, rather than capturing only the funding that flows to specific cluster-approved projects. Hub-level

prioritization would also enable donors and aid agency leaders to maintain a clearer view of whether the most urgent needs are being equitably covered across the whole of the crisis.

Donors could reinforce this in several ways. A core group of interested donors could call for pilots of area-based coordination and promise to orient their funding around the priority activities identified in the hub-level planning processes. A proportion (perhaps 25-50 percent) of this core group's multilateral financing, which today is mostly earmarked toward individual UN agencies (and by extension earmarked to the sectors or populations they are mandated to serve), could instead be earmarked geographically. Geographically earmarked money could go into enhanced country-based pooled funds, perhaps via a version of the block-grant model that OCHA has used to manage the large Gulf donor contributions to the pooled fund in Yemen.

Other pooling models could also be pursued, depending on the context; in some countries, NGOs and/or local civil society organizations have managed to establish effective pooled funding models. The Central Emergency Response Fund could likewise commit to allocate at least 50 percent of all country-level allocations through country-based pooled funds, and the funds could then in turn allocate unearmarked block grants to the operational hubs (in Congo the country-based pooled fund provide block grant allocations to hubs to be prioritized locally; in Nigeria the entire country-based pooled fund has been devolved from the capital to the field-level hub in Maiduguri). Donors could also make clear to bilateral NGO partners that they are explicitly receptive to area-based program approaches and provide support for pilot programs aligned with area-based principles.

Clarify Authority and Responsibility

Devolving authority over program and funding priorities to subnational hubs could prove contentious. In a centralized cluster model, power to set priorities (and with that, influence funding) accrues at the central level and sits with the major agencies that manage the clusters.

Transferring that influence out to integrated subnational hubs will dilute individual cluster lead agencies' influence over funding priorities, and shift decision-making on program strategy away from the capital. This could prompt resistance; recent experiments with devolving coordination authority to a subnational level have in some countries prompted pushback from agency heads. In Myanmar, efforts in recent years to devolve decision-making to subnational hubs in Kachin and Rakhine prompted tension and resistance from the core Humanitarian Country Team in the capital, and suspicion that OCHA was trying to expand its authority at the expense of the larger UN agencies.

A core group of interested donors could call for pilots of area-based coordination and promise to orient their funding around the priority activities identified in the hub-level planning processes.

This reticence to devolve authority to subnational hubs reflects the inherent difficulty of changing power dynamics in humanitarian response; but it also underscores a serious gap in policy guidance. Existing UN guidance on coordination authorities barely addresses

devolved subnational coordination, spending little more than a page of the 2015 updated cluster coordination guidelines³⁰ on it. And that guidance, while acknowledging the importance of the subnational level in local accessibility and accountability, conceives of this solely within the confines of the individual clusters. It outlines light guidelines on establishing subnational counterparts to the country-level clusters, but not an integrated hub model or meaningfully devolved authority.

Efforts to devolve coordination and planning authority away from the capital therefore exist in a gray area. There is no monolithic way to approach this devolution; it must be specific to the requirements of the crisis, factoring local political dynamics, the capacity of the host government, and other country-level variables. In countries piloting area-based coordination it will be important to clearly articulate new responsibilities and division of labor between the Humanitarian Country Team, cluster lead agencies, and the subnational coordination hubs.

There is some precedent for this. In Nigeria, the transition several years ago to a devolved crisis coordination hub for the northeast in Maiduguri initially encountered substantial resistance from heads of agencies in Abuja. However, after a country mission by the Emergency Directors' Group noted shortcomings in collective performance,³¹ the Nigeria Humanitarian Country Team agreed to devolve operational and funding functions from the capital to Maiduguri and formalized this via a documented operational plan. The operational plan established Local Coordination Groups with clearly defined roles across the affected areas of northeast Nigeria, supported by dedicated coordinators. The groups reported to the regional hub in Maiduguri, and management of Nigeria's country-based pooled fund was shifted to Maiduguri to support the new approach. Clearly laying out the structure and authorities of a devolved coordination approach, backing it with higher-level political support (in this case from the Emergency Directors' Group), and aligning funding tools with the area-based coordination was crucial to making this approach work.

Existing UN guidance on coordination authorities barely addresses devolved subnational coordination.

The credibility and objectivity of the dedicated subnational coordinators will be greatest if they are delinked from any individual organization's fundraising or programmatic interests.

³⁰ IASC reference module, 2015,

https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/reference_module_for_custer_coordination_at_country_level_2015.pdf

³¹ The Emergency Directors' Group is composed of the emergency directors of major UN agencies and NGOs, and advises the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on operational matters, field policy implementation, and collective humanitarian performance. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/the-emergency-directors-group>

Articulating the authorities and roles of the subnational hubs in a new area-based coordination approach will still leave open the question of who is best suited to lead them. Some flexibility is warranted here. The case examples discussed above make clear that an appropriate level of dedicated coordination capacity is needed to make an area-based approach work, but also make clear that there are multiple options for this. In Somalia, a dedicated tri-cluster coordinator proved effective. NRC's Afghanistan initiative shows that coordination functions could in some settings be projectized through actors supported to provide those services. Going back further in humanitarian history, the 1999 Kosovo response organized the early operation around subnational zones, each lead by a major aid agency; the Mosul case referenced in this paper highlights a more contemporary cluster-era spin on that approach. OCHA could potentially support dedicated local coordination units, as has been rolled out in Congo and Nigeria.

The Humanitarian Coordinator and Humanitarian Country Team, under the guidance of the global Emergency Directors, are best placed to determine what will work in a given country setting. In general, the credibility and objectivity of the dedicated subnational coordinators will be greatest if they are delinked from any individual organization's fundraising or programmatic interests; a dedicated and appropriately empowered individual will likely be preferable to a lead agency model (unless that lead agency agrees to forego its programming role in areas it coordinates). Whatever the model, it will be important to designate a clear leader within the humanitarian country leadership to oversee the day-to-day operations of the coordination structure and ensure accountability. This function would in most countries fall most naturally to a designated Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator. This is the approach adopted in Congo and in Nigeria, under which OCHA played its customary coordination support function at the subnational level but the hubs were managed under the authority and oversight of the Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator.

In a real, if implicit sense, the cluster approach is a power structure that reflects and reinforces the authority of the major traditional players while marginalizing those outside the club. Any reforms must consider the practical ways in which power is exercised, authority is legitimized, and access is brokered.

Be Candid About Power Dynamics

Finally, the humanitarian sector needs to grapple more explicitly and honestly with its own entrenched power dynamics, and what it will take to change them. In an overt sense, the cluster system is an operational coordination mechanism for enhancing the consistency, efficiency, and technical proficiency of humanitarian relief. But in an equally real (if implicit) sense, it is a power structure that reflects and reinforces the authority of the major traditional players while marginalizing those outside the club. The clusters are led by the most powerful agencies, and the structure has evolved to reflect many of their institutional prerogatives. Influence within the clusters lies primarily with large international agencies that have the resources, staff bandwidth, technical expertise, and linguistic skills to engage. And local

groups, while eligible to participate, face a range of practical obstacles to fully taking part—small size, limited staff time, language, and other barriers.

Rethinking humanitarian coordination cannot be a purely technical exercise. While it is important to determine the right technical design for a coordination mechanism, any reforms must likewise consider the practical ways in which power is exercised, authority is legitimized, and access is brokered within the mechanism. Under any new coordination structure, the incentive for traditionally powerful agencies to subtly coopt it toward their own institutional interests—as they have with the clusters’ role in humanitarian financing—will be strong. Resistance from large agencies to expansion of OCHA’s role over the years reflects, often, a concern that stronger coordination will come at the expense of their own authority. Likewise the pushback, in some countries, to devolving coordination and planning authority beyond the capitals where agency country directors sit.

There are ways to offset those incentives, some of which this paper has already discussed. Delinking cluster leadership from control of fundraising priorities is an important step. Pushing program cycle planning out to subnational level can enable local partners to have greater access and influence in the process. Devolving management of pooled funding from central level to sub-national level has been shown in Congo to enhance local access to funding.

There are subtler steps as well. Reframing coordination around local geography and local priorities, rather than internationally defined technical sectors, would help offset the imbalances in technical authority that define influence within the clusters. Holding subnational coordination meetings in local languages, rather than the languages familiar to international agencies, would help to make coordination and planning more accessible to local experts. It would also send a powerful signal if the international organizations—rather than the local leaders—were the ones who needed translators to understand the meeting.

But importantly, few if any of these changes will happen organically. Powerful bureaucracies rarely act unprompted against their perceived interests. The impetus for meaningful coordination reform will probably have to come at least partly from the donor community, and take place in concert with corresponding changes to humanitarian financing practices (which we will explore in a forthcoming paper). A core group of donors could even seize the initiative and decide to proactively fund pilot area-based models to further strengthen the proof of concept for an area-based coordination model. Our ongoing research on humanitarian donor behavior has found that many donors are skeptical of the reliability, impartiality, and comprehensiveness of the appeals and strategies produced by the existing humanitarian program cycle. Improving those products will remain difficult as long as the system that produces them remains technically siloed and top-heavy. Achieving other aims

The impetus for meaningful coordination reform will probably have to come at least partly from the donor community, and take place in concert with corresponding changes to humanitarian financing practices.

donors have endorsed—like the Grand Bargain commitments toward impartial needs assessment and locally driven humanitarian action—will likewise be remote without shifts in the coordination architecture. As the humanitarian sector contemplates persistent shortcomings in the Grand Bargain and begins debating what reform will follow, donors have a strong interest in pushing for an updated coordination model.

Conclusion

The cluster coordination model has unquestionably improved the effectiveness of traditional humanitarian response operations; but it has also exhibited persistent shortcomings. After 15 years of operation, these shortcomings appear to be inherent features of the cluster approach, rather than perfectible flaws. A next-generation approach to humanitarian coordination is needed—one that retains the upsides of the cluster model while addressing its weaknesses. Restructuring humanitarian coordination around area-based principles holds the greatest potential to deliver a humanitarian coordination and planning architecture that is centered on and inclusive of affected people and local actors; can engage with the inherent intersectionality of dimensions of humanitarian vulnerability; and deliver humanitarian relief in a cohesive, effective manner.

Appendix 1. The Potential for Area-Based Approaches in the COVID-19 Response

Experience from the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa demonstrates the importance of devolving and integrating coordination at a subnational level. Coordination models used in that response, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone, involved features that align with the principles in this paper, and which are important for humanitarian action on COVID-19:

- **Multisector integration:** Battling Ebola entailed aligning a diverse range of different kinds of institutions. This did not come naturally. An after-action report³² on Liberia's coordination efforts observed that "international organizations 'wanted to run their own platforms independently because that's what they were used to. . . The mentality was to operate in silos, which [resulted in] duplication and inefficiencies.' One of the biggest challenges involved finding ways to integrate those disparate domestic and international bodies into a single, coherent coordination and decision-making framework." The solution used in Liberia was to activate an Incident Management System (IMS) that could incorporate a range of different partners into a single unified coordination structure. Government officials sat with NGOs sat with UN agencies sat with technical experts sat with community leaders. This IMS approach enable a unified planning and coordination model rather than the siloed fiefdoms of the cluster system. Sierra Leone and Guinea also both established similar incident management systems.
- **Decentralized implementation and decision-making:** Just as area-based coordination devolves authority to geographically organized subnational platforms, frontline response implementation was not managed by the national Emergency Operations Center (EOC) but rather by decentralized locality-level EOCs.³³ These EOC structures organized coordination and planning by geography rather than by sector, with sectoral operations integrated at a locality level and reporting in a unified way up to national-level EOCs. In Liberia, 15 county-level EOC integrated local case-finding, laboratory diagnosis, contact-tracing, medical care, safe burial teams, community engagement, and other functions to ensure appropriate operational alignment on the ground. Subnational EOC structures in Sierra Leone and Guinea played similar roles.
- **Local/international co-ownership of coordination structure:** In all three countries the EOCs at national and local levels were run and managed under government authority with support from international partners. Institutions like the US Centers for Disease Control, the UK's Department for International Development (DfID), the UK military, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the International Organization for Migration assisted the governments in establishing the EOCs and provided initial support in operating them. International aid agencies

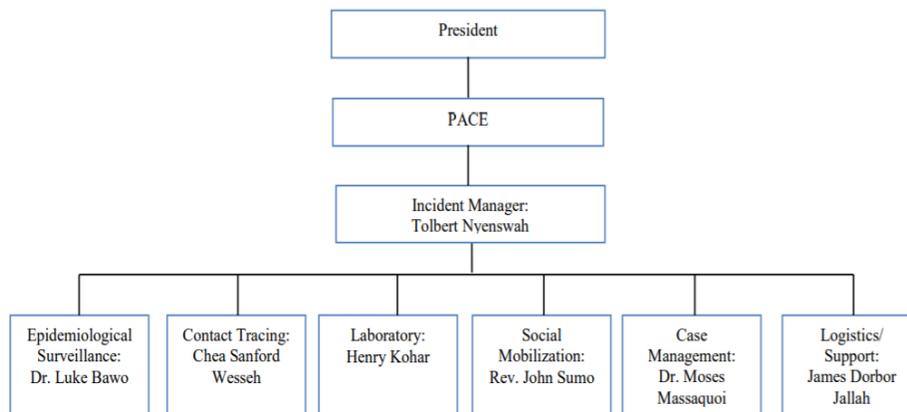
³² Leon Schreiber and Jennifer Widner, "Chasing an Epidemic," 2017.

³³ J.C. Brooks, M. Pinto, and A. Gill, "Incident Management Systems and Building Emergency Management Capacity," 2016.

were represented within the EOCs and coordinated their activities through EOC-led processes. But it remained explicitly clear that the overall structures were nationally led.

In Liberia, for example, overall decision-making authority for the Ebola response rested with the President’s Advisory Committee for Ebola (PACE). President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was explicit that her intent in establishing the PACE was that “this was not going to be a situation where the international people were going to control it.”³⁴ The government’s Incident Manager was part of and reported to the PACE, and the sectoral leads in turn reported to him (figure 7). This was mirrored at the national and subnational EOCs, where international partners participated (with the US Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, USAID, and Médecins Sans Frontières in prominent roles) but under the clear overall lead of government Incident Managers.

Figure 7. Liberia’s National Ebola Response Framework



- Explicit community ownership and engagement: Building community engagement into the coordination and planning process emerged as a clear best practice in Ebola operational coordination. As a UNICEF after-action study³⁵ on the West Africa outbreak noted, “poor community linkages and poor quality of services...undermined community confidence, effective social mobilization, and ultimately the response itself.” This lesson was echoed in the 2018-20 Ebola response in Eastern Congo; a WHO assessment mission³⁶ led by an author of this paper noted that “Community engagement must be a two-way process that both shapes community behavior and shapes the response strategy...rather than a standalone tool used to persuade communities to adapt to the requirements of a response.” But integrating community engagement into response coordination remains unusual in humanitarian action. In the West Africa Ebola response,

³⁴ Leon Schreiber and Jennifer Widner, “Chasing an Epidemic,” 2017, 8.

³⁵ AM Gillespie et al., Social mobilization and community engagement central to the Ebola response in West Africa, 2016.

³⁶ Felicity Harvey, Jeremy Konyndyk et al., *From “never again” to the “new normal”*, 2019.

community engagement was built directly into the national and sub-national EOC structures, and engagement with trusted community leaders was essential to building acceptance of the response.³⁷

Humanitarian institutions should bear these lessons in mind as they respond to COVID-19. Humanitarian operations and the agencies conducting them are a subordinate cog in much larger, government-centered response operations, and must plan and coordinate accordingly. Aligning with national leadership and supporting frontline community organizations will be crucial to success, as will cultivating interactive feedback channels with local populations. Tactical and operational decision-making should be devolved to locally led frontline entities as much as possible. And humanitarian actors must become more comfortable coordinating and partnering with agencies and local structures beyond their habitual circles; working with and through national EOCs or similar mechanisms will be essential.

³⁷ Harvey et al., *From "Never Again" to the "New Normal"*, 2019.

Appendix 2. Methodology Note on Analysis of Cluster Funding Appeals

We reviewed the 10 largest 2019 humanitarian appeals to analyze their proposed allocation of funding across organization types. The appeals include Bangladesh (JRP), Iraq, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria (HRP and RRP) and Venezuela (RRP). Where data was available for the health, food security, nutrition, and shelter clusters (all appeals except Syria and Venezuela RRP) the data was broken down by cluster and organization-type. Since the FTS database does not include organization-type in reference to the appealing organization when filtering on appeal by project, organization-type was manually coded for each organization as either “national or local,” “INGO,” “UN agency,” “Red Cross/Red Crescent,” or “other.” Organizations coded as “affiliated” in the FTS database are included here as INGOs.

In some instances multisector projects in the FTS database allocate an undefined portion of total funds across multiple clusters. To avoid this ambiguity, the analysis in our graphs includes only projects with “pure” cluster categories (for the shelter cluster, this includes shelter as well as non-food items). The analysis was also conducted inclusive of mixed-cluster project funding as a robustness check (running the same analysis on all funding tagged for a given cluster, whether single- or mixed-sector projects). The findings did not notably shift the overall proportional composition reflected herein. Of the clusters analyzed, no local or national organization accounted for more than ~2 percent of the sector total in either scenario. The shelter cluster experienced the largest difference in requested funding by a national or local organization as a proportion of the sector total, accounting for 1.51 percent of the shelter total when including multi-cluster projects and 1.32 percent when analyzing shelter-only projects. Among cluster lead agencies, the nutrition sector showed the largest difference between the scenarios, with cluster lead agencies accounting for ~69 percent of the sector total when multisectoral projects are included and ~75 percent of the sector total when the multisector projects are excluded.

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